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AUTHOR Pevoto, Allan E.
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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study of adults aged 65-74 investigated why few of them participated in organized educational activities. Interviews were conducted with 33 individuals at seven senior citizen centers in or near Houston, Texas. They included eight Caucasian females, six Black females, nine Hispanic females, one Oriental female, five Hispanic males, and four Black males. None of them had participated in organized educational activities. Only the center in an upper middle-class, predominantly white area offered a variety of courses; those in the areas that ranged from being predominantly Black or predominantly Hispanic to being almost racially balanced offered only an English as a second language course. Among the 33 individuals, 19 made comments that indicated that a poor self-image kept them from participating, and 21 lacked interest in the kinds of course that were offered. They were not interested in arts and crafts courses, which in the words of one participant "are for old people." They were interested in courses on computers, drama, literature, history, government, languages, reading, writing, math, and current events--courses that would "keep them in touch with the world." Additional findings were that self-directed learning was the preferred method for many, continuing education was seen as very important to 25 of them, and lack of formal education was not a barrier to participation. (Sixteen references are included.) (CML)

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF NONPARTICIPATION BY OLDER ADULTS IN ORGANIZED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Presented by

ALLAN E. PEVOTO, PH.D.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

In 1983 Robinson stated, "Research findings clearly show that the involvement of old people in educational activities remains more a potential than a reality" (p. 65). The number of older adults participating in educational activities is certainly not in keeping with their numbers in the population. Various participation rates have appeared in the literature over the years; for example, Johnstone and Rivera reported in 1965 a rate of 9% for those 55 and over. Cross (1979) reported a participation rate of from 5 to 10%. Marcus (1978) reported a participation rate of those over 65 years of age at approximately 2 percent. For the same age group, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) reported a 9% participation rate.

There is a very clear indication that older adults today are better educated than were preceding cohorts. The percentage of older Americans who had completed high school rose from 28% to 48% between 1970 and 1985. The median level of attained education increased from 8.7 years in 1970 to 11.7 years in 1985. Despite this, they are never-the-less the "most underrepresented of all subgroups in adult educational activities" (Cross, 1979, p. 86).

PROBLEM

The literature contains numerous reports suggesting various reasons why older adults do not participate in organized educational activities. There are almost as many studies appearing which suggest reasons that older adults should participate. Yet the evidence is very clear; they do not participate.

The literature suggests typical "barriers" to older adults participating in organized educational activities. These "barriers" are as varied as the population to whom they relate. They run the gamut from the "feeling of being too old to learn" (Cross, 1981, p. 57), to socio-economic status (Darkenwald, 1980), the level of attained formal education, that is, the lower the attained formal educational level, the less participation (Booth, 1961; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Fisher, 1986). Other barriers noted were transportation problems (Heimstra, 1972), poor health (Kerka, 1986), time and location of classes (Mc Carthy, 1981), lack of interest (Peterson, 1980), and education not responding to the needs of the elderly (Covey, 1981).

Knowing that these "barriers" exist has done little to improve the participation rate of older adults in organized educational activities. Attempts to convince older adults to participate because of great societal changes taking place of which they need to be aware and to which education will help them adjust have had

little effect. Peterson (1985) suggested that education "can offer an understanding of the contemporary changes in the social order and a mechanism of adjustment to those changes" (p. 2). Yet the elderly stay away in great numbers.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research was to examine why older adults, specifically those in the 65 to 74 age range do not participate in organized educational activities. Inherent is this question are secondary issues, such as, (a) should we, as adult educators be concerned with this low participation rate, (b) do older adults need to participate in organized educational activities, and (c) are there factors that would motivate older persons to participate in organized educational activities?

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study, based on the naturalistic paradigm. The study was conducted in seven Multi-purpose Senior Centers in the Houston, Texas area. These centers are administered by the Houston office of the Area Agency on Aging. Six of the centers were within the Houston city limits, and one was in Pasadena, Texas, a Houston suburb. The centers are geographically dispersed and covered all quadrants of the city. One center was predominantly Caucasian and upper-middle class, the other centers

ranged from being almost equally racially balanced (2), to predominantly Black, (2) and predominantly Hispanic (2). Most of the latter six were located in neighborhoods that might be characterized as lower middle class to lower class in socio-economic terms.

Interviews were conducted with 33 individuals at the seven centers. . The ethnicity and gender of the participants were as follows: eight Caucasian females, six Black females, nine Hispanic females, one Oriental female, five Hispanic males, and four Black males. These were persons who had been identified by the center administrators as not having participated, to their knowledge, in organized educational activities. In several instances people approached me and asked to be interviewed. One elderly female tugged on my sleeve as I was walking through the Center and said, "I want you to be sure to talk to me before you leave, I want to be interviewed." As it turned out, several of these individuals were participating in formal educational activities at the time of the interviews, these were accounted for in the study. All interviews except one were taped. The interviews were conducted between October, 1989 and January, 1989. All interviews started with the same question, "Tell me how you spend your time at the Center." The remainder of each interview was open-ended depending on the interviewee's responses.

FINDINGS

My experience was later corroborated by others, that the participants in this study spoke very openly about their lives as senior citizens and their lives as they had grown from childhood to adulthood. The way they responded to questions about how they spent their time led to other questions about their educational background, attitudes toward education, interests in continuing their education, self-directed education, and how those without much formal education learned to adapt and cope in a rapidly changing world.

At the center 17 individuals participated in various games, i.e., Bingo, cards, dominoes, and pool. Several participated in dance program, worked on ceramics or crocheted, or simply sat and talked. One Hispanic male said, "I just sit over there and watch people." Five of the 33 were participating in organized educational activities at the Centers. Three were taking courses such as drama, English literature and a study of the Torah, and art lessons. Two were in ESL classes. Many of those interviewed were active in volunteer work either at the Center or outside. When not at the center they did what most of us do when not at our place of work. They took care of their homes, they babysat for their grandchildren; they played Bingo every night. Those who tended to be inactive at the center were also inactive at home. The one Oriental female in the study said she often read

the dictionary because it helped her learn words. Five of the participants said they tried to "keep up". They read newspapers or watched television. Many, however, felt that just "keeping up" was difficult because they had no formal education and never learned how to read well enough to read a newspaper or magazine.

The years of formal education among this group of participants ranged from zero years to the completion of two years of junior college. Five had no formal education at all. One of the Hispanic females stated, "My mother died when I was two years old; school was far from where I lived on the ranch. I didn't have no transportation, nobody to send me. I can read and spell a little bit, but I cain't write, I ain't never been to school to see somebody write." Three had finished the first grade. One Hispanic male was pulled out of school after the first grade because his father needed the children to help pick cotton; he never went back. One of the Black females, from a rural area in southern Louisiana, left school after the sixth grade because, "That was as high as school went where we lived, and mother couldn't afford to send me into town to school. My father had just died, and I had to go to work." One Black male, who had completed the seventh grade said, rather proudly, that he was "Reared up in Bastrop county (a rural county in central Texas) and finishing the seventh grade there was as good as finishing high school. You knew everything you needed to know, how to read, how to write and how to spell. What else was there for you

to know?"

The twenty seven of the 33 participants who had less than a high school education were predominantly Black and Hispanic. All but two of these had grown up in rural environments. Most, if not all reported little encouragement from their parents concerning education. One Hispanic female reported her father did not believe in school. Another said all they wanted to do in those days was work you, schooling was not important. One of the Black females reported that her parents thought school was important but the children had to work in the fields, they had no choice. The six who completed high school were all female, four Caucasian and two Blacks. All reported being encouraged to finish school. One, whose father was an immigrant, said her father would have killed her had she not finished school.

For many of those without formal education, self-education, was the factor that made the difference. Twelve had found that the only way they could survive and live a reasonably decent, productive life (their terminology) was to educate themselves. They learned on their own. They learned from watching others. They learned from their children and their peers, but they learned. A Black male, who had been an over the road trucker for a major steel firm for 37 years learned to read bills of lading by comparing the numbers on the lading slips with those on the pipe he delivered. He would call up his boss and ask him what the letters and numbers meant. That the lack of formal education is a factor in the nonparticipation of some of the elderly in

organized educational activities was painfully stated by one of the Hispanic males, "How can I [participate], I ain't got any education, if I didn't get it when I was young, how can I get it now?"

Though many discovered that making a living by other than very menial jobs was difficult without education, this did not encourage many to either continue what education they had, or to engage in formal education upon reaching adulthood. Several did take training courses such as mechanic's school, or business school, but many did nothing. One Hispanic female said she didn't know it was possible to get education as an adult. She had married young, had a number of children and simply did not know further education was possible.

Two of the Black men indicated they "didn't need education." They had "mother wit." (a term I had never heard before, which means common sense.) One said, "I got more mother wit than education. I can do a lot of things people with education cain't do." Two of the females in this study said they couldn't participate in more education because, "my brain is too full, there is no room to put anything else."

When asked about an interest in education, twenty five, including those who were not actively participating in eduacational activities said they were interested and that education for senior citizens was important.

Although the question of self-image was never raised as a question during the interviews many of the responses made by the

particpants related to their self-image and to the role that their self-image, negative or positive, played in their decision to participate or not participate in organized educational activities. Although again, not a part of this research, Cross's COR (Chain of Response) model, suggests that in examining adult participation in formal educational activities, the first step in the model is looking at the individual's self-image (Cross, 1981). Nineteen of the participants in this study displayed, in what they said, a negative self-image. They made comments such as, "No need to do something when you know you can't do it" or "Sometimes I'm afraid of being rejected...so I just don't take the chance", or "I'm afraid I might make a fluke and that would make me feel low...if I make a mistake, then I would think that I hadn't did anything." Others made comments about being slow learners, or things being hard to learn. Several commented about how difficult it was to learn to use a microwave oven. One complained about not being able to learn to use a metric measuring cup.

Not all the participants were negative. In fact some were very positive about their abilities to learn. One Hispanic female stated, "No I'm old, but I don't feel old. I still have the ability to learn."

Nine of the participants expressed concerns about being too old to learn, although three of these changed their minds later in the interview. For most this was not a concern. They felt that you never get too old to learn. They didn't participate for

other reasons, such as health (9), not having time (3), schedule of courses (4), lack of transportation (6), money, i.e., cost of classes (3), not aware that classes are offered (8).

Twenty-one of those who were interviewed said they would participate if the Centers offered courses in which they were interested. They were interested in courses on computers, literature, history, government and languages for example. Eleven of the participants said they were interested in course that would improve their basic skills. They wanted courses in reading, writing, math and speaking. They wanted to be able to go to the store and know what they were paying. They were not interested in artsy-craftsy courses. As one female participant told me, "Those are for old people."

The two common threads running through all of the reasons for not participating in organized educational activities, at least for this group of 33, were for 19 of them, a poor self-image, and for 21 of them, lack of interest in what was offered.

PATTERNS

Several patterns were suggested by these findings. Twelve of the 14 Hispanics who were interviewed had less than an eighth grade education. Only two of the Hispanic males had better than a first grade education. Four of the Hispanics had zero formal education. None had finished high school.

Eleven of the 24 females in this study expressed a negative self-

image. Six of those who said they were too old to learn expressed a negative self-image.

Those with the least amount of formal education participated in some kind of self-directed education after reaching adulthood. There did not appear to be a pattern between participating in self-directed education and the racial, ethnic or gender status of the participants.

An interesting pattern existed within several of the individuals. Several of the Hispanic males, with little formal education and expressions of a negative self-image said they would participate if courses in which they were interested were offered.

CONCLUSIONS

1. A negative self-image as learners is a major factor in non-participation of older adults in organized educational activities.
2. The barrier to participation in organized educational activities for many older adults is not lack of interest in education [as reported in the literature] but lack of interest in the kind of education being offered when they can attend. The participants in this study wanted education that would contribute something to their lives, that would "keep them in touch with the world." They wanted computer classes, literature classes, drama classes, history classes, government and current events classes,

English classes, reading and writing classes and math classes. They wanted classes that would challenge them and challenge their minds, such as, classes in foreign languages.

3. For twelve of the participants in this study self-directed education was the key to whatever success they had achieved in their lives. For several, this was still the preferred method of getting education.

4. For 25 of the participants in this study continuing education was seen as very important. But they did not want something just to fill the time before they die. They wanted education that would be meaningful in their lives.

5. While barriers, as reported in the literature, do indeed exist in the lives of older people, for this group of older citizens many of these barriers were transitory and temporary. For many of these people the only barriers that likely cannot be overcome are health and "not having much time left to live." Even some of those who reported health problems said that they would probably participate if courses were offered in which they were interested. The same is true for such barriers as lack of transportation, lack of time, lack of knowledge, lack of formal education and a negative self-image.

6. This study did not confirm that lack of formal education is a barrier, as reported in the literature. In fact, four of the seven who were participating in some form of organized educational activity had less than a seventh grade education.

7. Clearly the educational and learning needs of this group of

senior citizens were not being met, nor were they even being examined. The findings of this study suggest that classes offered, if any, were selected without the input of those such programs were meant to serve.

8. The only center examined in this study where a variety of courses were offered was the one center located in a predominantly Caucasian, upper-middle class neighborhood and attended predominantly by upper-middle class Caucasians. During the time this study was being conducted I found little evidence of courses, other than an ESL class or two, being offered at the other centers.

While many "barriers" have been suggested as reasons for a low participation rate in organized educational activities by older adults, what is clear from this study is that those participating in this study did not participate for two specific reasons: they had a poor self-image, and/or because the courses offered were not those in which they had an interest.

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